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ABSTRACT

Because most decisions that affect quality of schools are made in the community, citizens should become school partners in education. This booklet offers the following suggestions for citizen actions: (1) Get informed. As "owners" of the local school board, citizens have a right to know what students are expected to learn. Individuals should inform the media if inadequate attention is given to board meetings. (2) Get involved. School resources are stretched thin. Volunteers, most of whom are not parents, help because of personal satisfaction; such service counts as work experience for civil service application in 36 states. Those with a variety of skills and experiences may become volunteers. Many volunteers work in classrooms offering special help to children and assistance to teachers. Volunteer needs outside the classroom include arranging field trips, arranging guest speakers, and teaching health-related skills to staff. Volunteers help children with special needs by talking with handicapped children, helping children to practice English, and other ways. (3) Get active. Citizens should participate in school board meetings by serving on task forces, joining the parent/community organization, and getting other organizations involved. Citizens should speak up about concerns, including budget issues, remembering that quality education may depend upon their understanding and support. (CJH)

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Citizens and the Schools

Partners in Education

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Education Is Our Best Investment

Americans established schools to educate their children almost as soon as the first settlers landed on our shores. Since that time, the American commitment to provide education for **all** children has led to the development of a public school system that educates **more** children to a **higher** level of achievement than any other school system in the world.

But schools can't afford to rest on their past achievements. At no other time in our nation's history have our schools been so important.

- Education is vital for our nation's economic prosperity. In the coming "information age," workers will need to be increasingly better educated. Good schools are essential if we are to maintain our economic position in the world.
- Education is vital for our national defense. The machinery of defense is more complex today than ever before. Sophisticated knowledge is needed to operate it. Plus, people must understand the concept of democracy to know what they are defending.
- Good schools are essential to the health and quality of life of your community. Educated workers are more productive. Companies that are considering relocating, and bringing new jobs with them, regard the public school system as one of the major considerations in their

decision to move. So good schools can actually help increase employment and your community's overall prosperity.

- Education is an investment, not an expense.

Education pays off. . .and the cost of neglect is high. One study has estimated that illiteracy costs our society over $12 billion per year — in lost production, in welfare, in prison costs, and in other social services. If we fail to invest in our human resources up front, we will pay and pay and pay.

All citizens have a stake in our public schools. And all citizens also have a role to play in making sure the schools do the job we need them to do. It is well known that we have federal "concern," state "responsibility," and local "control" of education. That means most of the decisions that affect the quality of your local schools are made right in your community. It's up to you to support quality schools.

Schools need all citizens to become **partners** in education. How can you become a school partner? Get informed, get involved, and get active. This booklet offers more than 50 suggestions of specific things you might do, depending on the needs of your local schools.

Get Informed.

How much do you really know about your local schools? When was the last time you were in a school? Does your local newspaper regularly carry stories about the school system? Do you know what students in your community are expected to learn? Has your school district had to eliminate vital programs or activites during the past few years?

As one of the "owners" of your local public schools, you have a right to know the answers to all these questions. And schools generally want to provide you with the information you need: nearly every school district has people who can help you. If you have questions about your schools, feel free to ask. Call your school district's administrative office. Ask to be put on their mailing list. Find out about public meetings that may be scheduled on questions of special significance to your schools.

If you think your local newspaper should give more attention to the schools, contact the editor. If you would like your local television or radio stations to share more information about schools, say so. And support your school system in its efforts to keep you informed.

Get Involved.

Today, we expect our schools to educate **more** children than any other nation in the world. In Japan and in Western Europe, for example, students compete for the right to attend secondary schools. We also expect our schools to do many of the things that homes used to do: feed children adequate meals, offer health care, and provide counseling.

All of these needs are real and worthwhile. But they also mean that school resources — both people and money — can be stretched pretty thin.

Most schools need extra help. That's why so many hundreds of thousands of citizens have pitched in to help. Across the country, volunteers are involved in helping schools provide all children the best possible education.

Most of these volunteers, interestingly enough, are **not** necessarily parents. According to a study conducted by the National School Volunteer Program and the National Center for Educational Statistics, only about one third of all school volunteers are parents. The rest are college and high school students, older Americans, and business employees.

Why do so many people without children in the schools volunteer to help?

- **Personal satisfaction.** Volunteers can see the difference they make in the lives of children. They watch kids learn, grow, develop confidence. And most feel that they **get back** more than they give. One grandmother who worked with profoundly handicapped children said, "I couldn't live without these children. They keep me young."
- **Skill development.** Volunteers use their time in schools to develop, retain, or brush up on their own skills. For example, an executive secretary tutored students in bookkeeping — a skill she was not using in her current job. A college journalism major discovered a talent for photography when she voluntered to help with the high school newspaper. Many people have moved from volunteer jobs to paying positions in related fields.

Volunteer service is counted as work experience for those applying for civil service positions in 36 states. The application form for federal employment also provides a space to list volunteer experience.

Could **you** be a volunteer? Here are some questions to ask yourself:

Do you have a special skill, such as bookkeeping, knitting, calligraphy, auto mechanics or other areas?

Do you like to read? If you have children, did you read them stories when they were young?

Do you enjoy listening to children?

Could you talk about your career, telling students the skills and knowledge they need to develop to be successful?

Can you speak a foreign language?

Have you traveled to other states or other countries? Do you have photographs? Would you be willing to share experiences if needed?

Would you make telephone calls for the school?

Are you a grandparent? Would you like to symbolically "adopt" another grandchild?

If you answered "yes" to even **one** of these questions, you have a skill that the schools might be able to use. Here are some of the kinds of activities that volunteers have provided:

In the classroom. Many volunteers work in the classroom. Under the teacher's direction, they may offer special help to students, act as the teacher's second pair of eyes and ears, or perform other tasks that will allow the teacher to concentrate on teaching. If you are interested in this kind of volunteer experience, you might

- Read a story to children. In one small California town, older citizens visited the schools for a "Rock and Read" day. Many wore old-fashioned clothes. They sat in rocking chairs and read favorite stories.
- Listen to a child reading to you
- Tell a favorite story to children
  - tell a story using puppets
  - tell a story using a flannelboard
  - dress up as a character and let the children ask you questions after hearing the story.
- Listen to oral book reports
- Set up a special learning center, such as a science experiment.
- Drill students on spelling words.
- Give a spelling test.
- Supervise test taking for students who have been absent.
- Help with special projects, for example, sewing, knitting, cooking or carpentry.
- Talk about your hobby. One school sponsored a special "Hobby Day" to encourage children to read for pleasure. Volunteers set up displays of their hobbies and relevant books — a gourmet cook included cookbooks, a runner displayed running books. Children learned that grownups read for fun!
- Set up a class "store" so that children can learn about free enterprise.
- Work with flash cards to help students reinforce math skills.

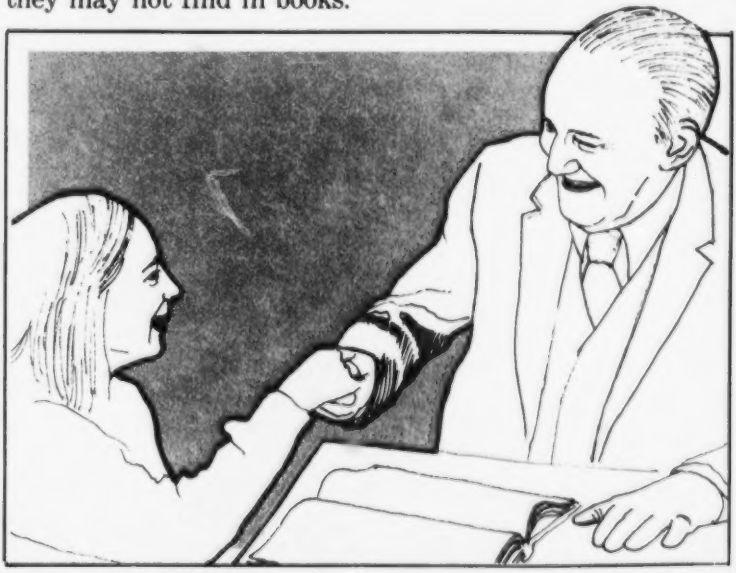
- Help a group of students complete a worksheet while the teacher is giving special help to another group.
- Be a "class grandparent." Because our society is so mobile, most children do not see their grandparents regularly. Some retired citizens are helping fill the gap by serving as "class grandparents." They visit elementary classrooms regularly, read stories, provide extra listening, and occasional extra hugs — in short, all the things grandparents do so well.
- Take attendance or count lunch money.
- Talk about a place you've visited. Show photographs.
- Talk about your ethnic heritage. (Display ethnic food, art, dance or clothing.)
- Talk about your career relating it to what students are learning in school or to the skills, knowledge, and attitudes students might need to be successful
- Talk about handicaps. Blind volunteers in New York City visit elementary schools to talk about being blind. They explain how they organize their clothes, and how they learn to recognize coins by sense of touch.

• Help teach a lesson or unit. In one elementary school, a Japanese parent is helping children learn to speak some Japanese. In a high school, professional chemists are helping teachers teach chemistry classes, letting students know the relationship between what they are learning in class and what chemists do on the job.

In one Pennsylvania program, retired artists are helping teach younger students. They are assisting teachers and making it possible for a new generation to share their love of the arts.

In some areas, students are learning crafts from older Americans. The younger generation will preserve such skills as quilting, tatting, and perhaps playing the hammered dulcimer because of the generosity of older volunteers.

• Act as a "living historian." Did you grow up in the days before the invention of television? Do you remember the Great Depression? Did you fight in World War II or serve in Korea or Vietnam? Were you living in Europe during the rise of Hitler? By sharing your memories, you can give students a perspective on historical events that they may not find in books.



Out of class. Schools need volunteers to help with many important jobs outside the classroom. They include:

- Telephone the parents of students who are absent from school.
- Share your management expertise. Could you help the school put records on the computer? Are you skilled in accounting? Employed and retired business executives have found that schools are sometimes delighted to profit from their management skills.
- Arrange a special field trip.
- Help check out audio-visual equipment.
- Assist in the library reshelving books, helping children select books, or keeping books repaired.
- Tape record a favorite story for younger readers.
- Work with a child who is unable to attend school because of prolonged illness.
- Help take children to the lunchroom or the bus.
- Arrange guest speakers for a class.
- Arrange a special performance by an arts group for the school.
- Help out in the school nurse's office.
- Teach a special health-related skill, such as first aid or CPR, to school personnel.
- Help produce a newsletter for parents and/or the community.
- Serve as a lay reader for student essays, allowing teachers to assign more writing.
- Assist in organizing a school-wide career day.
- Letter awards to recognize outstanding achievement.
- Lead a book discussion or other study group after school. Help in a math, computer or reading lab.

Helping Children With Special Needs. The public schools are committed to educating **all** children. But children with special needs often need extra attention. Here are some ways volunteers are helping:

- Talk with handicapped children. For many mentally handicapped children, progress in school

depends on the ability to use language. Volunteers can spend extra time with these children, encouraging them to expand their language and their ability to communicate with the world.

- Transcribe books into Braille.
- Help a child practice English. Children who are learning to speak English can make more rapid progress if they can use the words they know in conversations. Volunteers can give them that opportunity.
- Tape record a textbook for visually impaired students or students with reading problems. (Note: Publishers are almost always willing to grant permission in such cases.)
- Work with physically handicapped children. Volunteers may allow schools to provide children extra time on the balance beam or work on specially programmed exercises.

After school hours. Not all volunteer work takes place between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. Even if you have a full time job, you might be able to help the schools. Here are some ideas:

- Organize or coach in an after-school athletic program.
- Donate tickets to a special event, such as the circus, a symphony concert for children, or a play.
- Help build something the school needs.
- Contribute to special fund raising drives. Many communities also have special scholarship funds. If not, you may want to consider starting one.
- Attend a school-sponsored event. Do you love music, plays or dance? Enjoy basketball? Whatever your interest, your school probably sponsors such an activity. By attending, you'll be encouraging the student participants. . . and you'll have a good time!

Get Active.

Schools are public institutions, and are governed by representatives of the community. School finance issues are frequently on the ballot. In many communities school board members must run for office. Most school board meetings are open to the public.

You have a right and a responsibility to participate. And as an informed, involved citizen, you will find that **your** voice will influence how others feel about the schools. Here are some of the ways citizens become active.

- Serve on a task force or advisory group. Many school districts have established citizen advisory groups on such issues as vocational education, special education, gifted and talented programs, budget and finance and in various areas of the curriculum. They often need help. You may even be interested in membership on the school board.
- Join and stay active in your local parent and community school organization.
- Get your business involved. Many businesses are actively involved with schools. Some offer help by

adopting a school. Others sponsor special events or publications. If your business is not yet a school partner, perhaps you can see if there is a way to participate.

- Get other organizations involved. Are you a member of a religious or civic organization? Perhaps there is a special project that your group could undertake. Some churches provide groups of volunteers. Civic organizations may provide funds for special reading programs, building new playgrounds, purchasing computer terminals or other needed projects.
- Speak up. Express your support for high quality education. If you have concerns, talk directly with your school's administrators. If you are especially pleased with a particular school program, be sure to let that be known as well.
- Take a realistic look at your school's budget. Because of the critical importance of the job schools are being asked to do many communities are deciding that they must provide additional resources. School districts are public institutions, and often welcome citizen interest in the budgeting process. Get involved. If you feel that the schools in your community need additional financial support, participate actively in the campaign.

Keep in mind that high quality education might just depend on your active and enthusiastic understanding and support.

Citizens and the Schools — Partners in Education is a publication of the American Association of School Administrators, 1801 N. Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209. The manuscript for this publication was written by Kristen Amundson, with graphics by Gene Uhlmann. Project director was AASA Associate Executive Director Gary Marx.

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